

FAQs: Mental & Physical Health Care During Residency and Fellowship

Am I allowed to practice medicine if I have been treated for a mental health diagnosis or substance use disorder?

Yes, as long as it is not currently impairing your practice. One study indicates 29% of residents have had depressive symptoms and 10-12% of physicians have a substance use disorder. With treatment and support, however, countless physicians have enjoyed long, productive and satisfying careers.

Am I required to report my mental and physical health diagnoses when applying for my medical license?

Physicians with mental and physical health diagnoses can obtain a medical license in every state, but the process for doing so varies between states. States differ in how they ask about current versus historical diagnoses. How this information is handled also differs from state to state as listed on the application. Concerns about getting a medical license should *never* keep you from seeking treatment for a mental or physical health diagnosis.

The New Mexico license application asks: “Do you have or have you been diagnosed with an illness or condition which impairs your judgment or affects your ongoing ability to practice medicine in a competent ethical and professional manner?”

What should I do if I am sick and cannot work on a day I am supposed to see patients?

If you cannot work due to being acutely ill and are scheduled to see patients, notify your supervising attending and your chief resident immediately so they know you are okay and not to expect you that day. Your chief resident can determine how best to proceed to ensure patient safety.

If you need to see a clinician, the UNM LoboCare Clinic usually has same day availability for urgent issues: 505-272-8481.

What should I report on my job applications if I took time off during medical school or residency?

There is not necessarily a requirement to disclose any time off, but it is common to be asked about gaps in training and employment. Always plan to be honest in your answers, but know that you aren't obligated to provide extensive details including specific diagnoses. For example, it may be enough to provide information such as “I was on a medical leave of absence for __ months and returned to work with no restrictions.” You may wish to speak with your residency program director or another trusted faculty member about how best to answer this in person and on your applications when it comes up.

If I have to take sick leave during residency, is the reason why kept private from my colleagues and supervising physicians?

Yes. If you have to take a prolonged amount of sick leave that will affect your ability to complete educational requirements on time, you should talk with your program director early to plan on how to minimize the effect on your training.

What mental health questions are asked on fellowship program applications?

There are no specific mental or physical health questions asked on ERAS residency or fellowship applications. The questions that *may* apply to mental or physical health diagnoses include:

- Was your medical education/training extended or interrupted? If yes, please provide details [blank box].
- Are you able to carry out the responsibilities of a resident or a fellow in the specialties and at the specific training programs to which you are applying, including the functional requirements, cognitive requirements, interpersonal and communication requirements with or without reasonable accommodations? If no, please list your limiting aspect(s): [blank box]

How should I explain a leave of absence on my fellowship application?

Talk with your program director or a trusted faculty advisor about what should be disclosed and what does not need to be. Always plan to be honest in your answers, but know that you are not obligated to provide extensive details. For example, it may be enough to provide information such as “I was on a medical leave of absence for _ months and returned to work with no restrictions.” Work with your program director or advisor about how to prepare to answer related questions on the application and in your interviews.

How can I take time off to see my doctor for routine care?

The University provides a half-day of paid wellness leave each quarter for you to attend to your personal health and wellbeing, for a total of one full day each half-year. All residents and fellows may also use their Sick/Health Leave to seek routine medical, mental health, and dental care. Routine appointments should be scheduled with as much advance notice as is reasonably practicable to allow your program to arrange coverage. Talk with your chief residents to plan this into your schedule, and refer to the house officer manual for more details.

All residents and fellows have up to 21 days of paid sick/health leave per year. Some rotations also have enough flexibility to permit a reasonable accommodation so you can leave for a short period during your shift.

My work is starting to negatively affect my home life and my relationships with my family and friends are deteriorating.

What resources are available to me?

Often times other people notice problems before we do, so pay attention to these signs and suggestions when this feedback is offered. There are many confidential UNM resources to support you and your mental health. Use of these resources will *not* be reported to your residency program:

- Jeff Dunn, MD, (UNM Psychiatrist) is available to see residents, fellows, and students: 505-272-6130 or JeDunn@salud.unm.edu
- UNM Counseling, Assistance, and Referral Services (CARS) offers free counseling to UNM residents, fellows, staff and students: 505-272-6868
- Agora Crisis Center: <http://www.agoracares.org/> or 505-277-3013 or 866-HELP-1-NM
- Liz Lawrence, MD, (Chief Wellness Officer, Internist) is available to see residents, fellows and students: elawrence@salud.unm.edu

I am concerned about my drinking or drug use. What resources are available to help me?

There are many confidential resources available to you at UNM to support you if you're concerned about substance use.

- Jeff Dunn, MD, (UNM Psychiatrist) is available to see residents, fellows and students: 505-272-6130 or JeDunn@salud.unm.edu
- Agora Crisis Center is a phone hotline with walk-in counseling: <http://www.agoracares.org/> or 505-277-3013 or 866-HELP-1-NM
- Pamela Arenella, MD is a UNM Psychiatrist with additional board certification in Addiction Medicine, and is available to meet with residents, fellows and students: parenella@salud.unm.edu

I used to have a substance use disorder/drinking problem/drug problem. Do I need to tell my residency program?

You're not required to tell your residency program about previous diagnoses, but you may wish to speak with your program director so that they can connect you with resources to help you find extra support to manage the stresses of training.

Do I need to report use of medical marijuana/cannabis or other controlled substances to my program?

There is not yet a consensus in the medical community about how to manage physicians prescribed controlled substances, including medical marijuana. Some employers (including training sites) require negative results on drug testing at the time of hire and randomly throughout employment. Speak with your program director about how to manage this and your prescribing clinician about other evidence-based treatments that may be available to you.

What resources are available to me if I am feeling depressed or anxious?

There are many confidential resources available to you at UNM to support your mental health. Use of

these resources will not be reported to the medical school or your training program and are not documented in the EMR:

- Jeff Dunn, MD, (UNM Psychiatrist) is available to see residents and fellows, usually within a few days, and has after-hours appointments: 505-272-6130 or JeDunn@salud.unm.edu
- Agora Crisis Center is a phone hotline with walk-in counseling: <http://www.agoracares.org/> or 505-277-3013 or 866-HELP-1-NM
- Outcomes New Mexico is a phone hotline providing counseling 24 hours a day: <https://www.outcomesnm.org/contact-us/schedule-an-appointment/> or 505-243-2551
- UNM Psychiatric Emergency Services are open 24 hours a day, 7 days per week: 505-272-2800
- National Suicide Prevention Hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days per week: 800-273-8255

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